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Vol. I

FIGHTING JOE:

OR,

The Game Man of the Plains.

By KIT CLYDE.



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FIGHTING JOE;

OR,

The Game Man of the Plains.

By KIT CLYDE.

Author of "Bow and Arrow Jack," "Fox-cap, the Friend of Daniel Boone," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

FIGHTING JOE.

ONE bright summer night, some thirty years ago, a small party of United States cavalry was encamped about a day's journey from Santa Fe, in the Territory of New Mexico. They had been out for two weeks in search of certain persons who had been surreptitiously inciting the Indians to resume their depredations upon that thinly-settled border.

The camp had not been established three hours ere a party of redskins came in and wanted to trade, steal something, or make trouble.

They outnumbered the soldiers three to one, and, for that reason, the latter were kept under arms all the time in order to be prepared for anything that might turn up.

Only a half dozen men were allowed to mingle with the redskins. The others were held in readiness for any emergency.

About ten o'clock, when it looked as though the redskins were about to take absolute possession of the camp by making themselves at home with everything, and the officer in command of the cavalry had made up his mind to give them no ground for complaint on this score, a white man entered the range of light and said:

"Hello, redskins! Hello, cavalry, by thunder! Glad to see the old flag and uniform once more! I fought under Taylor and Scott in old Mexieo," and he went up and shook hands with the cavalymen as though he had been acquainted with them all his life.

They shook hands with him, of course, and then looked him over from head to foot. He was a typical border man—a Southerner, they guessed from his general appearance, being lean and lank, with a brace of revolvers and the inevitable bowie-knife stuck in his belt.

The Indians looked at him and judged him to be a good-natured kind of a pale-face, as he had a hearty, careless way about him.

"Who are you, sir?" Captain Lyon asked, when he shook hands with him.

"Who, me? Well, I'm Joe Shelby. I come from old Kentucky, though it's a long time since I left that State of pretty gals and fine horses. I was——"

"Where are you going?" the captain bluntly asked again, interrupting him.

"Well, I started from Leavenworth to go to Santa Fe. I wanted to see the old place I had heard tell so much of, and, as I had fought with Scott and Taylor for this blamed country, I thought I'd just come along and look at it."

"You don't mean to tell me that you have come all the way from Leavenworth by yourself, do you?" the astonished officer asked.

"Yes, I do. I ain't going to lie about it. I'm all alone. No derved fool would come with me, and so I took my foot in my hand and lit out, and here I am. I've had lots of fun on the way, too, I can tell you, and——"

"Did you see any Indians on the way?" Captain Lyon asked.

"Well, yes. I seed a few, and we had a good time. They didn't know me, you see, and——"

"Did they give you any trouble?"

"Trouble! Lord bless you, no. Redskins don't trouble me any. If they can find it in their hearts to forgive me for the trouble I've given them, I'm ready to shake hands with them all day long, and I don't——"

"But didn't they attack you?" the captain asked.

"Oh, some young bucks would try to play with my hair sometimes, but I didn't mind that at all. They are very playful cusses sometimes, but they don't mean to do any harm—eh, redskins?"

"Ugh!" grunted an old savage, gathering his blanket about his dirty person, "pale-face talk like big fool."

"Ugh! Wah!" came in a chorus from the others.

"Yes—'ugh, wah!' so I say. Some Injuns are funny cusses. If you don't let them have any fire-water, they will be all right, but the derved skunks always want to fill their skins full of whisky and then play 'big Injun' when they can't half fight. No white man can fight when he is drunk; neither can a redskin, but the coppery cusses don't seem to notice it. Why, hang me for——"

"See here, Shelby, if that's your name," interrupted Captain Lyon, "don't make your remarks about the Indians so personal. We don't want to have any trouble with them."

"Lord bless you! no, sir. They won't give you any trouble, they won't. There ain't any fight in these redskins. They are just trying to skeer you with their dirty faces. I say, redskins, got any tobacco?"

"Ugh! no."

"Well, I've got some good plug here. Have a chew, old yaller-belly," and he thrust the end of a plug of tobacco under the nose of the red man.

The tawny rascal could not resist the temptation. He took the whole plug, and, instead of cutting off a chew, walked off with it.

Captain Lyon smiled.

"Hold on, you yaller son of a ground-hog!" cried Shelby, running forward and wheeling the redskin around, as if he were nothing but a child. "Take a chew—not the whole plug. Why, there's a hundred chews in that plug. I ain't so derved liberal as to feed you on tobacco for a whole month!" and he took the plug from him, and twisting a chew off the corner of it, tendered it to him.

"Ugh!" grunted the savage, his little black eyes dancing with wrath. "Pale-face heap big fool," and he turned away without taking any notice of him.

"You'll make trouble here, sir," said Captain Lyon, sternly.

"Do you think so, cap?" he asked.

"Yes, I know you will. You'd better keep your mouth shut. You talk too much altogether."

"Oh, thunder! You don't mean it now. Why, shutting my mouth cuts my wind off, and you——"

"Oh, shut up!" cried Lyon, "you'd talk a whole regiment to death in a week."

"Well, now, seeing as how you ain't sociable, I'll leave you to your Injun company. May be you like 'em better'n you do me. May be I'd like 'em better'n I do you. You takes your choice, and so do I. By-bye, old blue coats!" and turning on his heel, he walked away in the darkness, and was out of sight in a minute.

"Why, hanged if the fool isn't gone!" exclaimed Captain Lyon. "Here! Come back here, you fool!"

Shelby never replied, but kept on, and soon his footsteps died away in the distance.

"Well, well!" ejaculated the captain, "I never heard such a talker in all my life. I wouldn't have him in camp one week for a major-general's commission. He must have talked his way through from Leavenworth. Don't believe he came from there anyway."

Five stalwart redskins slipped away from the camp and disappeared in the darkness of the night. Captain Lyon knew that they were going after the man's scalp, but dared not interfere on a mere suspicion.

He talked pleasantly with the redskins, who remained about the camp, and kept his men under arms to be prepared for any emergency.

In about an hour, one of the five Indians who had gone out after Shelby left, staggered into the light of the camp-fire, covered with wounds from which blood flowed like water.

The other Indians crowded around him with eager inquiries.

"Ugh!" groaned the redskin, lying down on the ground. "White man fight all over like wild cat."

"Who did it?" demanded Captain Lyon, forcing his way to the side of the wounded Indian.

"Pale-face."

"What pale-face? One of my soldiers?"

"Ugh! no. Him heap talk pale-face. Injun thought him no fight. Him kill us all."

"There were five of you who left here an hour ago. You went after that man Shelby. Did you find him?"

"Ugh! Yes. Injun find him. Him heap fight like prairie fire, cut Injuns all up. Wah! Me all cut up too."

"Where are the braves who went with you?"

"All dead. Pale-face think us buffalo-meat and cut us up."

"Did you attack him?"

"Ugh! we went to take his scalp. He fight for hair. He say, 'Me Fighting Joe,' and kill us all."

"I am sorry. You should have let him alone. He did you no harm. You have been punished."

Captain Lyon turned to his men and asked:

"Did any of you ever hear of that Joe Shelby before? This Indian says he called himself 'Fighting Joe,' and actually killed four of them and cut up this one."

The soldiers were astounded.

They had seen many tough fighters in the far West, but never one who talked as flippantly as this Joe Shelby did; hence, when they heard that he had wiped out five stalwart redskins single-handed, they wanted to see him again.

Sergeant Ransom replied to the captain's inquiry:

"I remember having heard of a 'Fighting Joe' in Cheyenne," he said, "but never heard what his real name was."

"Well, I'd give something to have that fellow back here," said the captain, "so I could apologize to him for

forcing him to leave the camp. I didn't dream there was much fight in him."

The wounded Indian was attended to and had his wounds dressed by the surgeon of the company, who happened to be along. He found seven wounds made by a bowie. Some of them were frightful-looking wounds, but none were in a vital part.

"He is in more danger of bleeding to death," said the surgeon, "than from any other cause. That fellow must have played upon him as though he was trying to see how much carving he could do without killing the redskin."

"I can't understand it," remarked Captain Lyon, shaking his head. "The Indians must have made a mistake and attacked the wrong party."

The Indians were greatly excited over the affair, and would have started in pursuit of the man who had taught them such a terrible lesson, if night had not concealed the trail from them.

They would also have attacked the little squad of cavalry, so enraged were they, but they were afraid of the consequences.

Captain Lyon kept half his men on guard all night, and thus avoided any difficulty with the Indians.

But as soon as it was light enough to see the trail, the red-skins prepared to follow it and avenge the death of their comrades.

"Now, look here, chief," said the captain, sternly facing him, "that man has done nothing but defend himself when attacked. Let him alone. I shall be compelled to fire on you if you attack him."

"Ugh! You fire on Injun, then Injun shoot, too, an' take scalps," replied the chief, insolently.

"Be careful of what you do. The Government is strong enough to hang every Indian in the West," said the brave captain, "and can send ten white soldiers to one Indian. Better let this man alone."

The warriors made no reply, but went away with sullen countenances, looking as determined as their immobile features could indicate human feeling.

"I guess we'd better go along and protect that fellow Shelby," said the captain, turning to his lieutenant.

"Yes," was the reply. "It's a pity to let a brave fellow like that be butchered by the redskins."

The company struck camp and hurried forward on the trail of the Indians, hoping to keep near enough to prevent them from carrying out their threats of vengeance.

The stranger had not made any attempt to conceal his trail. He went along like one on a great highway of travel, as though there were no enemies in the world to interfere with him.

It was early in the afternoon when the captain heard a few straggling shots a mile or so in advance of him. He hurried his command forward, and soon heard yells and howls.

Dashing up with his command, he found some six or eight savages engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with the man Shelby, whom, the night before, he had ordered out of his camp.

Such a fight he had never seen before in all his life.

The hunter appeared to be a bundle of steel springs. An Indian might raise his tomahawk to strike him, but, ere he could wink, the man would dart between his legs, upset him, stab him in the back or disembowel him, and cut two or three more before they could again locate him.

"Charge!" yelled the captain, and the next moment the cavalry thundered up on the combatants and captured the entire party.

"Oh, gosh darn it all!" exclaimed Shelby, turning angrily on Captain Lyon. "What, in smoke an' brimstone, are you interfering in this thing for? It's my little game this time, and, gosh darn it all! I want you to let my little fun——"

"Why, thunder and blazes, man!" cried the captain, "those fellows would have cut you to pieces in two minutes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Shelby, looking greatly amused. "Why, the cusses are just amusing me, cap! Lord, but it's fun when I get a whole lot of 'em on to me. There's five of 'em laid out, an' t'others got holes all over 'em."

"Are you hurt?"

"Lord bless you! no. I don't git hurt. Only you've hurt my feelings by coming in an' stopping the fun. I never enjoy anything so much as having a dozen redskins around me trying to get their fingers in my hair. Why, there's been more'n two hundred redskins a trying to get my hair since I left Leavenworth. Oh, but it's fun, and no mistake!"

"By the great Plains!" exclaimed the captain, getting off his horse and taking him by the hand. "You're the best fighter on the plains. You'll leave no work for the army if you stay around here long."

"Oh, but the army don't seem to like the fun," said Joe.

"We have to obey orders," said the officer. "I want to apologize to you for my words of last night. I——"

"Oh, that's all right, cap," said Joe. "Old Joe Shelby never gets mad about words. You can stand and swear at him till the sun goes down and comes up again, and he won't keer a continental shin-plaster. If you want to fight, though, old Joe is right there a hankering after the fun. Lord bless you, but you oughter seen them redskins last night. They——"

"My God, man!" exclaimed the captain, in profound astonishment, "are you man or devil?"

"Neither. I'm a lively old man, who runs around to shake off the blues. I say, cap, let them redskins go. Don't arrest 'em. Let 'em go. They're sick enough. Let 'em go."

Captain Lyon saw that nearly every one was wounded, whilst five were dead and two more likely to die.

He asked the chief:

"I guess you're sorry now you didn't take my advice and let this man alone, aren't you?"

"Ugh! Pale-face heap wild-cat."

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed Shelby, "I ain't nothing to a wild-cat. I'm nobody but old 'Fighting Joe Shelby,' who ain't worth shucks at home. There's more fun out here among these coppery cusses than in all the shows in the world. I say, cap, going to Santa Fe?"

"Yes; are you?"

"Yes, if these here redskins 'll let me."

Captain Lyon and his men burst into a hoarse laugh. The idea of redskins stopping such a man was perfectly absurd to them.

Joe himself laughed, and asked the wounded Indian chief:

"I say, old copper-belly, may I go to Santa Fe?"

"Ugh!" grunted the disgusted savage. "Go way. In-jun get scalp some day."

Joe burst into a loud guffaw, and then started off toward Santa Fe, followed by Captain Lyon and his cavalry.

CHAPTER II.

PARSON SLUGGER'S PHILOSOPHY—SANTA FE—ROARING JIM'S DEFEAT.

ON the way to the ancient city of Santa Fe, the jolly old hunter cracked his jokes and told stories of adventure to the infinite amusement of Captain Lyon and his men. To them he was a decided curiosity. His like they had never seen before. There was an odd quaintness about him that was undefinable.

"How long have you been coming from Leavenworth?" Captain Lyon asked.

"Lord bless you, sir, I don't know," he replied. "I don't count the days and weeks and months, for I ain't running against time. I just go right along at my own pace, and don't bother anybody that don't bother me. I once knowed a blamed fool who run against time, and when the cuss stopped, time kept right on and left him.

Oh, no, I don't bother about time. I started for Santa Fe, and I guess I'll get there before I stop. Where is the old town anyhow?"

"It's about fifteen miles ahead of you," said Captain Lyon.

"Oh, well, I guess I'll git there to-night, then, if the redskins don't stop me."

"They don't seem to do much in the way of stopping you," remarked the captain.

"Well, no, not much; but the derved fools try to anyway. Somehow I can't make the coppery cusses understand that this is a free country, and that a man may go where he derved pleases, so long as he pays his way. They seem to think that all the country west of the Mississippi belongs to them, gosh dern them. Why, cap, I wish I may be shot for a prairie-dog if the coppery cusses didn't try to drive about ten millions of buffaloes over me."

"What!" exclaimed the captain, glaring at him in open-eyed astonishment.

"Blamed if they didn't," said Joe. "I was walking along through the prairie, when they drove the biggest swarm of buffaloes down on me that ever mortal man seed. Why, cap, you just oughter seen 'em. They stretched way back to the North Pole, and——"

"But how did you escape being run over by them?" the captain asked, interrupting him.

"Why, blame it all, I had to jump on an old bull's back and go with 'em. I got a fifty mile lift out of him, anyhow."

"But," exclaimed the captain, "how did you manage to escape them in the end?"

"Well, you see, that old bull knowed that he had something on his back that didn't grow there, and I guess he didn't think it was a bug either. He couldn't shake me off and he couldn't lie down and roll over on me, because there were too many on 'em. I guess I worried him some, for he went his way to the outside, and went plunging along like mad, wondering what in all creation had got on to him anyhow. And would you believe it, cap, two of them coppery cusses tried to run us down, and kept shouting at us, trying to spoil our fun."

"I guess you spoiled their fun, didn't you?" said the captain, laughing heartily.

"Well, now that I think of it, I believe they did lay down on the prairie to rest, and their ponies went off and left them. But I tell you, cap, it was the biggest drove of buffaloes you ever seed in your life. Why, all creation was covered with 'em, and I am blessed if I ain't blessed to know where they come from. I don't believe there were less than fourteen hundred thousand millions of 'em."

The entire company roared with laughter.

"Well, now," he said innocently, looking up as though wondering what they were laughing at, "I didn't count 'em, I couldn't do it, and derved if I believe you could either, the whole gang of you."

The cavalymen screamed with laughter.

"Well, now," he said, "I don't see anything funny about it."

"Excuse me," said Captain Lyon, apologetically, "I am laughing at the idea of any one's attempting to count a herd of buffalo on the move."

"Well, I guess it would rather bother a man to do it," remarked Joe.

"Yes, I guess it would," said the captain. "But look here, Shelby, did any white man ever try to stop you?"

Shelby looked at him and chuckled.

"Well, a few," he said; "but they didn't do much at it. One big fellow up on White River said I talked too darned much, and told me if I didn't dry up, he'd just turn me round and kick me all the way back to Leavenworth. I told him I commenced talking very young, and couldn't stop, and that if he didn't like my talking he could go away, or cram prairie grass in his ears, and blamed if he didn't get as mad as a hornet, and make more fuss than a setting hen over her first chicken. I tried to talk him into

good humor, but hang me, the more I talked the madder he got. I told him all the funny things I knowed, and tried to help him laugh at 'em, and, I wish I may be scalped if he didn't come at me with a bowie-knife as long as my arm. I told him he'd hurt himself if he didn't keep cool, and sure enough he did."

"Why, how did he hurt himself?"

"Well, you see, we played round for some time, till we both got mixed up in a little scrimmage. I expected the derved fool would hurt himself, and the first thing we knowed he had cut his belly open. I told him that's what he got for being a fool."

The captain and his men laughed heartily, for they suspected how the fellow got hurt.

"What are you going to do in Santa Fe when you get there?" the captain asked.

"Oh, I'll knock around and take a good look at the place, and talk with the boys. I say, cap, are any of old Scott and Taylor's men out there?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "There may be a few."

"I'd like to see some of them," said Joe. "We'd have a good time talking over old times in Mexico together."

"Do you never get tired of walking?"

"No; never was tired but once in my life."

"How was that?"

"It was when I was sick once, and had to stay in bed two days."

"Oh, yes, I see," said the captain, laughing, "you can't stand confinement."

"No, not much I can't."

"Now, look here, Shelby, you must come around to the barracks and see me when you get to Santa Fe."

"Yes, I will; I will come around and sit up all night with you."

The captain looked blank, and asked:

"Hadn't you better come around and sit all day with me?"

"Well," returned the old fellow, innocently, "I want to see the old town in the day-time, but, howsomever, I'll come around. I wonder if there's any hard old cases in town."

"Hard cases! What do you mean?"

"Why, them fellows that talk and blow, and tell what big things they can do, and are always spoiling for a fight, and wanting to chaw up somebody. I'm a peaceable man, I am, and don't want to get into trouble with anybody. I ain't like some folks I know. Some folks are always making trouble and gettin' people into hot water, just as though they hadn't nothing else to do but to get up dog-fights between men who hain't got nothing agin each other. Why, Cap, I knowed a fellow once who'd tell a lie just to get up a row with somebody. He heard a man say once that the moon was nothing but a lump of green cheese with bugs in it, and I'm blessed if he didn't get mad, and wanted to fight, because the man in the moon, he said, was a friend of his, and I'll be hanged if he didn't wipe up the floor with that ere fellow. Such folks as them always come to a bad end. A man who is always spoiling for a fight is bound to get licked some day, but the man that always tries to keep out of a fight, but does his level best when he gets into one, is just my kind of a galoot."

The captain remembered the little scrimmage he saw him in an hour or two before, and laughed till he could hardly keep his seat in the saddle.

"Them's my sentiments," remarked Joe, as if to emphasize the words he had just uttered.

"Well," said the Captain, "I guess you'll find some hard cases in Santa Fe. They come there from California, from Mexico, and from Texas, and somebody gets shot nearly every night in the week."

"Lord bless us! Is that so, Cap?"

"Yes," was the reply. "I believe the roughest characters in all the West are to be found in Santa Fe."

"Well, I'll be derved!" exclaimed the old man, and his

eyes seemed to sparkle with smothered delight. "If old Parson Slugger was there, he'd change all that."

"Parson who?"

"Parson Slugger."

"Who is Parson Slugger?" the Captain asked.

"Why, Lord bless me, Cap, ain't you never heard tell of the Parson?"

"Not that I recollect," said the Captain. "Who the deuce is he, anyhow?"

"Well, he was just the best parson that ever banged a Bible, punched a snoot, or held a flush. He was just ahead of everything that ever walked on two legs. He came down to Deadman's Gulch one day and told the boys that he was a parson and had come to teach them the error of their ways. The boys throwed up their wool hats and swore they'd build him a church, but old Tom Blinker, the most cantankerous he-cat in the gulch, swore that he would be everlastingly blasted for quartz rock if he'd have any old parson whining round him. 'My friend,' said the Parson, smiling, 'you're a lost sheep, one of the lambs I'm looking for.' 'Yes,' said Tom, 'I was a lamb once, but I ain't now. Oh, no! I'm a hard-headed, stiff-horned old ram what can butt all the theology out of any galoot of a parson in three shakes of a lamb's tail,' and with that he ba-a-a-ed and went for him. Lord bless you, Cap, you ought to have been there. It was a glorious camp-meeting and the liveliest revival of religion you ever heard tell of. The parson shouted and cried 'Glory! Halleluiah!' as if he felt happy, but old Tom swore like them soldiers that got stuck in the mud somewhere, and all the boys in Deadman's Gulch gambled their dust on one or 'tother of 'em. The parson was a good man and never let up till he whipped the devil out of Tom. Yes, sir, Tom hollered. 'Will you come to preaching?' the parson asked. 'Yes,' said Tom. 'Do you believe in the Bible?' 'I do,' Tom yawned. 'Do you believe that John shook his fist at the sun and made it stand still?' 'Yea,' said Tom. 'Do you believe that Jonah went back on the whale?' 'I do,' said Tom. 'Glory! Halleluiah!' yelled the Parson, 'you're a converted man. You are a gentleman and a Christian. Get up and shake hands with the brethern,' and shoot me for a jackass-rabbit, Cap, if every red-shirted galoot in the camp didn't come up and shake hands with him. After that there was peace in Deadman's Gulch, for the Parson made Tom his right-bower, and, between the two of them, they kept the boys in the straight and narrow path that leads up the hill. But what in 'tarnal blazes are you all laughing at?" and he looked up at the soldiers, who were bent double with convulsive laughter, without a smile on his face.

"I'm laughing at the parson," said Captain Lyon. "If you'll send for him to come to Santa Fe, I'll see he has the biggest church in town to preach in."

"Well, may be I will," said Joe, "after I see the place."

"You can see the town from yonder hill," said the captain, pointing to an eminence in front of them.

Joe walked steadily up the hill from the top of which he got a sight of the ancient town.

After gazing steadily at it for a few minutes, he remarked,

"Well, it isn't much of a town after all, but may be distance don't lend no enchantment to the view."

"I guess you'll find it lively enough," said the captain.

"Oh, I never get lonesome nowhere. Alligators, bears, buffaloes, red-skins all get sociable with me. I'm the friendliest cuss on earth, captain, and don't make bad friends with nobody."

"The thunder you don't!" exclaimed the captain.

"Lord bless you, no, captain. Folks get disappointed sometimes, but that ain't no fault of mine, you know, because as Parson Slugger says, 'we can't always have our own way about things,' and what the parson don't know about sound gospel, the devil himself has forgotten. I'll bet more on the Parson's theology than on the best poker-hand on Deadman's Gulch. Whenever he shot a gospel

truth straight from the shoulder, unbelief went to grass, and that's why I bet on the parson every time, Cap. He always told me that whenever a galoot tackled me to give him the best I had, and then I'd be doing unto other fellows as I'd like to have other fellows do to me, and, if that ain't sound Bible doctrine, I'm a swindled Christian every time."

The captain roared with laughter, as did his men, and said:

"I guess you'll find a good many members of your church in Santa Fe."

"Is that so, cap?"

"I guess you'll find it so."

"I'm derved if that don't make me feel good all over, cap. We'll have an old-fashioned hullaboo down there, and everything will be lovely. Any fellows round there got private cemeteries, cap?"

"Yes, several of them."

Old Joe chuckled, and bit off a big chew of tobacco from his plug, with an air of intense satisfaction.

In another hour they entered the city, and Captain Lyon kindly escorted Joe to one of the many little taverns in the place, where he introduced Joe to the proprietor as a quiet inoffensive kind of a man, who was both able and willing to pay his way.

The proprietor looked at him as if to take his measure, and remarked:

"I guess we can take care of him if he can stand his hand with the boys."

"I'm a man of peace, landlord," said Joe, "and don't want no trouble with nobody."

"Then I guess nobody will trouble you," said the landlord, contemptuously.

Captain Lyon grinned from ear to ear, and winked at old Joe.

"Less have a smile, cap," said old Joe, turning to the bar.

"Of course," said the captain. "I was just going to suggest it."

Joe turned to the landlord and asked:

"Have you got any mild juice that won't hurt a Quaker to drink?"

The landlord stared at him.

The captain smiled, but Shelby looked as innocent as a lamb.

"You want it straight," said the landlord, looking him straight in the eye, and setting a black bottle and two glasses before him.

"That's so," said Joe mildly. "No crooked stuff for me. What are you going to pizen yourself with, landlord?"

"Oh, I'm straight every time," was the reply of boniface, pouring a drink from the same bottle, and gulping it down in company with the two guests.

Joe paid for the drinks, pocketed his change, and, turning to the captain, said:

"Much obliged to ye, cap. I'll come around and see you as soon as I get the dust out of my eyes."

"Do so," was the reply, as the captain shook hands with him. "Ask for Captain Lyon when you come."

The captain then left him to go to his quarters at the barracks, and Shelby proceeded to make himself at home at Bill Bludsoe's tavern.

At the time of which we write Santa Fe was a sort of headquarters for the roughest characters in America. Mexicans, Californians, Texans, and Indians assembled there nightly to drink and gamble and shoot on the slightest provocation.

There was a gambling saloon on the corner of every street, and miners, and herdsmen, and robbers, and gamblers met in them to squander what fortunes they had attained in that wild, rough country.

It is true that the stars and stripes waved over the town, yet, in spite of all that, it was thoroughly Mexican. The small adobe houses gave the town a decided Mexican look, and everything about them was Mexican.

Mexican men, women and children, and Mexican ponies to say nothing of Mexican costumes, were met on every hand.

It was supposed that American law accompanied the American flag, but while there were judges of the Territory of New Mexico, clothed with the dignity and majesty of the law, there was little for them to do. The bowie-knife and the revolver constituted about the only court recognized in the Territory, and there was more litigation in that court than any other, the best shots generally winning in every case.

A couple of hours after Joe Shelby's advent in Santa Fe, night came on, and he sat down in a corner of the tavern for a quiet time with his pipe.

Now, one of the few things in this world that Joe had an affection for was his pipe. It was an old pipe which he had used a long time. He had burned all sorts of tobacco in it, which had combined to make it what a refined aesthete would call a "stinker." Its odor, when Joe set it going, was very pronounced, penetrating to every part of the room.

Several rough-looking characters sniffed the air, and glared at Joe as if they would like to demolish him, but, when they saw his unconscious innocence, and noticed his placid enjoyment of the aforesaid pipe, they let him alone.

At last, however, one of the well-known bullies of Santa Fe came in with several of his companions, and called for drinks.

Everybody in the room seemed to know who he was, and he loudly proclaimed his name, for fear that somebody might be there who didn't know him.

"I'm Roaring Jim," he said, "of Blue Ridge Camp, the Yawping Catamount of the Hills. Who the blank blank is smoking that 'stinker' in here?"

Everybody turned and looked at Joe, who was innocently blowing rings of light blue smoke above his head, and taking no notice of the surroundings.

Roaring Jim quietly drew his revolver, and, aiming at the pipe, fired. The pipe was smashed into a thousand pieces, leaving the stem in the fingers of the innocent Joe.

The friends of the bully guffawed, while Joe rose to his feet, and quietly proceeded to gather up the fragments of his pipe, with which he walked deliberately up to the bar, deposited them on the counter, and then turned and knocked the bully into a heap in a corner. Then he took him and wiped him deliberately all over the floor.

He sat on him, and jerked out his beard and hair by handfuls. Then he stood him on his bald head, and kicked him in the stomach, knocking him into a heap of senseless humanity.

Two of Roaring Jim's friends went to his assistance, and commenced shooting at Shelby.

Joe gave each of them a bullet in the stomach, forcing them to retire from the field.

Such a complete clean-out had never before been witnessed in Santa Fe.

"Why don't some more of you pitch in?" cried Joe. "There ain't no fun in this derved old town. You know I told you I was a peaceable man, landlord, but I wish I may be skewered, if I don't make this cowardly cuss eat what is left of that 'ere pipe."

Roaring Jim had risen to a sitting position, the picture of perfect ruin. Only a few straggling hairs were left in his beard or on his head. He had been literally snatched bald-headed.

"Here, you comical cuss," said Joe, taking a handful of the fragments of his pipe, "eat that!"

Jim looked sick. He saw that he had caught a Tartar, but he demurred to eating the pipe.

"Well," said Joe, "you've got to eat that or eat me. You pays your dust and takes your choice."

Jim felt for his revolver. It was gone. He felt for his bowie. It, too, had vanished.

He looked up at Joe, and then quietly reached for bits of the broken pipe and began chewing them up.

"Well, I'll be blanked blanked!" said Jim Bludsoe, in profound astonishment.

"Give him a straight drink, landlord," said Joe. "It'll make the old bald-headed fool feel better."

Bludsoe gave him a glass of whisky, which Roaring Jim swallowed and then staggered out of the saloon.

CHAPTER III.

A HUMAN SPITTOON.

WHEN Roaring Jim left the saloon Joe Shelby went back to his seat, filled another pipe with tobacco, and went to smoking as though nothing had occurred to disturb the serenity of his meditations.

The by-standers stared at him in profound amazement.

He was a wonder as well as a puzzle to them, for he had whipped the bully of Santa Fe without getting a scratch, and had literally snatched him bald-headed.

"Who is he, Bill?" a score asked of Bludsoe, the landlord.

"His name is Shelby," replied the landlord, himself as much puzzled as the rest. "He came to-day."

"He's the whitest man in New Mexico, anyhow," Tom Dunlap, a huge Californian, said, "and I'm the galoot as is going to tell him so," and with that he walked over to where Jim was sitting, and, extending his hand to him, said:

"Stranger, my name is Tom Dunlap, a good-for-nothing galoot from California, who pays his way like a little man, and honors pluck wherever he finds it. Shake, I like your style, and hanged if I don't believe you're the whitest man in these diggings."

"Put it there, pard!" said Joe, extending his open hand. "I was born white, and ain't ashamed of my color," and the two men shook hands cordially, just like two friends. "This is a derved lonesome old town, ain't it?"

"Yes, when there ain't no fun going on," replied Dunlap.

"Thunder! Do they ever have any fun here?"

"Oh, yes. You had a little fun just now, didn't you?"

"Wal, that was a little breeze, but it's slow, pard—mighty slow. Why, blame it, pard, I've had more fun out in the woods with wild cats than there is in this whole town. I say, do you ever drink any pizen?"

"Oh, yes, sometimes, when I meet a white man," said Dunlap. "What'll yer take—copperhead or rattlesnake juice?"

"Rattlesnake every time, pard. No copperhead juice for me. I allers go in with a warning rattle like a genuine rattler. Talk about rattlers. I seed a chap out in the Injun country once who made money killin' the derved things, an' he jist made 'em scarce around them diggings, he did."

"How'd he do it, pard?" Dunlap asked.

"He jest let 'em bite him, an' the rattlers went for him like all possessed. But they swelled up and died quicker'n a jackass rabbit would from a rattler's nip."

"Jewhillikens!" exclaimed one of the crowd standing by.

"Fact, pard. Them rattlers all took a whack at him, and then rolled over, the deadest sarpints as ever shed a skin. They didn't have no show at all, which wasn't far for the snakes, nohow."

"But how was it, pard? I—I—don't understand it. Them rattlers allers kills their game down this way."

"Blamed if I wasn't puzzled myself, pard," said Joe, "till he give us the secret. He said he'd been drinkin' Sante Fe whisky for a year, an' that no rattler could stand it."

Such a roar as followed would have alarmed the citizens of any other place but Santa Fe. Nothing ever alarmed the people of that place. The crack of a revolver was such familiar music that it seldom interested any one but those making it.

Of all the men standing around and listening to the yarn,

only one expressed an opinion as to its truth. He was a burly fellow who had just come in, and had not had time to hear about the defeat of Roaring Jim.

"I say, pard," said the fellow, turning to Joe, "whar do yer hail from, eh?"

"The Lord only knows," said Joe. "I'm a tender-foot what don't know nothing about the origin of things."

"Wal, now, don't sing us any more sich music as that. 'Tain't good for ther singer, it ain't."

"Oh, thunder, pard, yer don't mean it now?"

"Yes, I do. Yer don't want ter sing agin Bill Bludsoe's whisky, yer understan'?"

"That's er fact, pard. I ain't got nothin' agin it, 'cause I'm puttin' away some of it now. Ef it will kill rattlers it won't kill me, I reckon. Yer see a rattler don't love whisky no how, an' ef he gets some of it in his——"

"Hang ther rattlers! What do you know about 'em, anyhow?" exclaimed the bully, who thought Shelby was showing the white feather.

"Why, Lord bless yer, pard, I've seen more rattlers in one day than yer ever heard tell of in all yer life. Why, they grow out in the Injun country, an'——"

"Say, shut down on that!" angrily cried the bully.

"That old claim is worked ter death. I won't have it!"

"But it's a good claim, pard."

"Shut up, I say!"

"Oh, yer ain't social in yer ways, pard, you——"

The bully aimed to strike him in the mouth with his right hand, but Joe caught it in his terrible grip and gave his arm a twist that compelled him to almost put his head to the floor.

A howl of rage burst from him and then he straightened up again.

"Yer see, pard, yer won't—oh, yer want a scrimmage, eh?"

The bully went at him in a white heat of rage, and was knocked senseless to the floor by a blow between the eyes, at which the crowd laughed. Joe wiped up the floor with him, dragged him round by the heels, plucked his beard out by the roots, and then sat down on him and took a drink of whisky.

"This is the loneliest town I ever struck," he said. "There ain't no life about it. Sich little ripples like this ain't nothing. Why don't a dozen of yer pile on to me, raise my har, an' have some fun? How do yer pass ther time, hyer, anyhow? Seems ter me yer ain't lively like yer use ter be."

The bully was the worst used-up man ever seen in Santa Fe. A more woeful-looking object could not have been found in that section after a week's search.

"Pard," he said, after seeing how utterly helpless he was, "I weaken."

"That's it—that's how it is!" cried Joe, getting on his feet with an air of supreme disgust about him. "I never saw sich onery cusses in my life. When things git interestin' and sociable-like, yer cry out 'I weaken,' for all the world like a Chinaman. Why don't yer sail in an' have some fun? Why, hang it, an Injun is woth a dozen sich onery cusses! The redskin would die game a goin' for my hair with his last kick. Don't no circuses ever come to this 'ere town, landlord?"

"Sometimes they do," said Bludsoe, "but not often. Have another drink. You're the most peaceable man I ever had in my house."

"Of course I'll have a drink, an' pay for it, too. Yer can see I'm a peaceable man. My father was a Quaker, an' my mother the most peaceable woman that ever suckled a kid. She allers told me, says she, 'Joseph, my son, never do yer make a row with nobody, an' don't yer never let nobody make a row with you. Fightin' don't never do no good, onless yer whip yer man. Don't never let a man git the best of you, an' you'll die an' go to glory.' Them's her words, an' I ain't never forgot 'em, an' what's more, I won't. She's dead nigh on to twenty years, an' I know she can look out from behind the stars an' see how her Joe re-

members her words. "I say, you," and he turned to the man he had so completely used up, "stand up an' take yer pizen like a screamer. Don't go for to be a fool an' make a row with a peaceable man again. Yer don't know when yer may tackle a yearthquake or a grizzly. Take a glass of somethin' hot, and pull yerself tergether again."

The bully staggered to the counter and gulped down a glass full of straight whisky. He was the meekest man in the crowd, but was the most treacherous, perhaps, in all New Mexico, for while Joe was swallowing his drink, he snatched a pistol from the belt of a by-stander and commenced firing at him. He was so excited that the bullet grazed Joe's side and entered the heart of a spectator, who sank down on the floor without even a groan.

He was about to fire again, when Joe hurled his glass at him, and laid him out at full length on the floor.

"Kill him!"

"Shoot him!"

"Let me get at him!"

"Clear the way!"

"The cowardly sneak!"

"Burn him!"

"Hang him!"

"Call Judge Lynch!" and a hundred other indignant expressions greeted the would-be murderer, as he went down under the glass from Shelby's hand.

"Hand's off!" roared Joe, and the crowd fell back. They had seen enough to fear him, and concluded it was healthiest to let him have his own way.

The discomfited bully was unconscious for several minutes from the effect of the blow. But old Joe waited for him to recover, and then said:

"You weakened, pard, and then acted like an onery cuss. Ye're meaner'n a Digger Injun. I made a smart cuss like yer eat my old pipe to-day, an' now yer've got ter play spittoon for this 'ere crowd."

The bully attempted to rise to his feet. Joe kicked him in the stomach, saying:

"Lie down on yer back, an' hold yer mouth open. Ef yer close it, I'll open a bigger hole in yer carcass in jes' one minute. Now, boys," and turning to the crowd, added: "Ye're goin' to drink lickin' with me, but all on yer as chaws terbacker come hyer and drap yer chaws inter this 'ere hole, and ef he don't swaller 'em he'll eat lead!"

A roar of approbation burst from the crowd. They were bent on hanging him for shooting at Shelby, not for killing the man he didn't shoot at. It was the cowardly treachery of the act that riled them, not the taking off of an innocent spectator. They cared nothing for a human life. They rated it cheaply—that is, *other* people's lives—and yet would stand on sentiment, as patriots would stand up for the flag of their country.

Joe was the first man to drop his quid of tobacco into the wretch's mouth. The miserable creature swallowed it. He had played a desperate game and lost, and now hoped to escape the penalty by cringing to his conqueror uncomplainingly.

The others followed, marching up to the counter to get their drinks after dropping their "chaws" into the open mouth of the doomed wretch. He was thus compelled to swallow at least a score of tobacco quids and look on at the crowd over whom he had played the bully so often.

"Now yer may have him," said Shelby, after the crowd had taken their drinks. "Ther ain't no more fun in him."

With a yell they rushed toward him, and dragged him out into the street, where a rope was fastened around his neck. He was too sick to protest or beg, and must have been unconscious when they started for a tree with him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BATTLE AT BLUDSOE'S.

SHELBY did not go with the crowd to see the lynching. He had seen too much of that, and took no interest in such things. He preferred to light his pipe and enjoy a quiet smoke.

The lynchers made short work of the wretch who was not content to remain whipped after having been neatly thrashed by the old stranger. They hung him up more dead than alive, and left him swinging there for the authorities to cut down and bury out of sight.

But the crowd came back to Bludsoe's place, whooping and yelling like so many wild cowboys, anxious to see more of old Joe Shelby, the queer character who had laid out two of the worst bullies that ever infested Santa Fe. Dunlap was with them, of course, declaring that old Joe was the whitest man in Santa Fe.

"We've strung him up, pard," he said, going over to where Joe was sitting smoking his pipe.

"That's right; why don't yer string up some more like him? Yer ain't got no enterprise in this 'ere town. Business is mighty dull, I reckon."

"Ain't it lively enough to-day, pard?" Dunlap asked.

"Lively! Why, pard, I'm real lonesome! Ef I didn't smoke, I dunno what I'd do."

"Have a drink with *me*, pard!" said a huge miner, pushing his way through the crowd and grasping Joe's hand in his.

"Of course I will. I'm a peaceable, quiet kind of a man, and allers take a drink just to keep the peace. Gimme some more straight, landlord."

The landlord never did a better business in his life. Hundreds of men came in to see the quiet old fellow who had cleaned out two of the worst characters that ever infested Santa Fe, and every one of them wanted him to drink with them. They looked on him with surprise plainly depicted on their faces, for they could not conceive how he could be the fighter he was represented to be. He was as inoffensive in appearance as any man who ever showed up in Santa Fe.

But, like all Western people, they admired pluck and prowess, and never failed to show it.

The friends of Roaring Jim, however, could not or would not forgive him for the unceremonious treatment given to him. He went down into the lower part of the town, into the worst haunts of either old or New Mexico, where his prowess as a fighter had long given him undisputed sway, and sent for a dozen of his pals, who came quickly to his side, not daring to do otherwise.

"Pards," he said to them as they came in, "look at me."

They looked at him.

"Look at me *good*!" he repeated.

They did.

"Was it a grizzly, Jim?" one of them asked.

"A grizzly!" he exclaimed, giving the questioner a withering glance. "Could a grizzly do *that*? Could *two* grizzlies do it—me, Roaring Jim?"

"Did you ever tackle a whole gang of grizzlies, pard?" another asked, amazed at the reckless daring of the man.

"No—'twan't no grizzlies at all," he growled. "Ef it was I wouldn't keer. I'd trail 'em an' have their hides or die. No, 'twan't no grizzlies. 'Twas *men*—more'n twenty on 'em—as done it."

"Why, pard, you must have been drunk."

"That's it. 'Twas Bludsoe's whisky as floored me like er streak o' lightnin'. It took all ther strength outen me. I was as weak as er baby an' almost er sleep in er corner, when er gang come in for drinks. 'Thar,' said one, 'thar's Roarin' Jim, fellers, the terror of ther diggings. He's drunk as er biled owl. Now's our chance. It's er rich lead—let's go for him all at onct,' an' they piled upon me to the roof. Pards, ef I wasn't so full of the meanest whisky in town I'd a killed every son of a galoot in the gang. But I couldn't stand up. I crushed four of 'em till they posted up the golden stairs, and then I didn't know no more. The cussed whisky was too much for me. When I came to I saw how 'twas. Them chaps was er drinkin' and howlin' and makin' believe they'd wiped *me* out for good. Says I, 'Yer galoots ain't struck the right lead, yer ain't. I'll get my pards an' show yer jes' whar yer missed it.'"

"That's so, pard!" said a dozen at once, all eager to get up a row under the lead of the notorious bully. They had not heard of old Joe Shelby, and therefore were willing to go into anything that promised loot and whisky.

"Yes, I knowed yer'd go with me. Ef they swarm I'll swarm, an' we'll be the maddest set o' hornets as ever drew stings, pards."

"Yes! Hurrah for Roaring Jim!"

Roaring Jim collected a score of them, all armed to the teeth, and started back to Bludsoe's place with them. They went howling like cowboys, and the news that they were coming went ahead of them.

Dunlap told old Joe that Roaring Jim, the pipe-eater, was coming with a gang of his friends.

"Is that so, pard?" he exclaimed, his dull gray eyes lighting up with pleasure. "The old town ain't so dull an' lonesome after all, then."

"No," said Dunlap. "I'll wager it'll be lively enough here in five minutes."

Joe jumped to his feet and said:

"I'm just hankering for something lively. Tell him I'll forgive him if he'll bring in the boys an' have a little scrimmage. Oh, ef Parson Slugger was here to encourage 'em!"

"Whoop!" yelled Roaring Jim, dashing into the saloon, a revolver in each hand. "Show me the galoots! I'm a terror! I'm Roaring Jim, of—thar's ther skunk! Whoop!" and he commenced firing at Joe Shelby.

The crowd scattered as the bullets commenced flying, and in the general excitement and promiscuous firing Joe was lost sight of. But he did fearful execution, emptying a brace of revolvers in less than one minute, making every shot count. Then, with a whoop that would have made a Comanche pale with envy, he drew his bowie and dashed into their midst, cutting right and left so fast that they couldn't find time to draw a bead on him. Every shot they fired at him did some harm to their own side. Some half dozen or more, including Bludsoe himself, drew their weapons and took a hand in the circus. Roaring Jim was one of the first to fall, his leg broken by a bullet, and two or three more finding lodgment elsewhere in his person.

"Whoop!" yelled Shelby, cutting right and left in the thickest of the *melee*. "This is fun! This is lively! Hurrah! Pitch in, boys! Raise my har! Give me yer best grip! Whoop!"

Such a spirit of battle the oldest inhabitant of Santa Fe never saw before. He seemed to bear a charmed life. Bullets flew all around him. Knives flashed on every side of him, and yet he remained untouched amid all of it, till the assailants began to fall back before such a demon of carnage.

"Don't go, boys!" he called out, cutting furiously at a couple of huge fellows who were trying to get out of his way. "Yer ain't sociable enough! Yer don't give a man any encouragement! Hold on and we'll have a drink when the fun is over!"

But the boys didn't wait for a drink with such a man. They started to fall back slowly, but in another minute they took to their heels, and scampered away like sheep from the presence of a wolf.

"Wal, that ends it," he said, regretfully, wiping the blood off his blade, and returning it to its place. "It was lively enough while it lasted. Give us a drink, landlord. If Parson Slugger was hyer now he'd ask a blessin' on the good work."

The landlord put out the drinks for the crowd, or what remained of the crowd, for the majority had sought safety in flight.

There were five men dead on the floor of the saloon, and twice as many so badly hurt that they could not get away, however much they desired to do so.

"This ain't sich a bad town after all, landlord," said Joe, grasping Bludsoe's hand over the bar, "and yer ain't a bad sort of a landlord, either. Hanged ef yer didn't draw an' wade in like a white man."

Bludsoe smiled and said:

"You may be a peaceable sort of a man, Shelby, but I'm blest if you haven't waked up this town more than the Mexican war did."

"He's the whitest man in America," said Dunlap, an' I'm a-healin' on that every time. Set 'em up agin, Bludsoe. Come up, boys, and drink with the best man west of Sunrise."

The crowd rushed to the bar, and for a half hour Bludsoe and his bartenders were kept busy setting up the drinks for the party.

The news had gone out in the city that a riot was in progress at Bludsoe's saloon, and the mayor at once called on the military to suppress it. Captain Lyon, the officer who had escorted Joe Shelby to the city and carried him to Bludsoe's place, was sent with his company to disperse the rioters.

Of course it was all over when he got there. Shelby was drinking whisky with his new friends and looking as innocent as a saint.

"Hello, Bludsoe!" he cried, as he entered the saloon. "What's the trouble here now?"

"No trouble at all, cap," was the reply. "It's all over now, except the funeral. We've got some to plant."

"So I see— Hello, Shelby!"

"Hello, captain!" and Shelby rushed up to him and shook his hand.

"We've had a little scrimmage, jest to pass away the time. 'Twas lively while it lasted. 'Tain't no dead town after all."

"Just what I told you yesterday. But do you know there is such a thing as law in this place, Mr. Shelby? Men who kill other men must account to the law."

"That's so, an' I'm glad of it, captain, only I didn't give 'em a chance to account for it, yer see."

"Yes—I'll have to arrest you and take you to jail."

"That's right—lock me up an—"

"You won't do anything of the kind, captain," said Bludsoe. "I'll raise a mob and tear down the jail if you lock him up. He's the whitest man in Santa Fe. Roaring Jim, that groaning skunk over there got up a muss with Shelby, got licked outen his boots, and then went off and got his gang to come back with him to clear us out. I won't let no man go to jail for that."

"Oh, let him take me. I never was in a jail in my life. I—"

"You won't go to jail with me, old man," said Lyon, grasping his hand and shaking it cordially. "I'm sorry I didn't see the muss. If you will only clear out that Roaring Jim gang this town will erect a monument to your honor even before you die."

CHAPTER V.

THE WIDOW'S APPEAL.

THE news of the wonderful fighting qualities of old Joe Shelby, Bludsoe gave a terrific description of the battle in his saloon.

"I tell you, pards," he said, "it was the most beautiful fight I ever clapped eyes on. He was just lovely, an' it would have warmed your hearts to see how he waded into Roaring Jim, the pipe-eater. He was the first man he tackled, and the pipe-eater went down like wheat straw under the scythe. The others just melted away before him like butter on a hot stove, an' he didn't git a scratch. He's a rattler, and the whitest man in America."

Joe was sitting in a corner quietly smoking his pipe and carelessly looking at the parties removing the dead and dying.

Captain Lyon kept his company around there several hours to keep back the crowd and prevent the breaking out of hostilities again. No arrests were made, for no one was killed that anybody cared anything about.

After awhile the military returned to the barracks and the crowd that remained at the saloon was as orderly as a Santa Fe crowd could be.

Bludsoe did an immense business at his bar. Every man in the town wanted to get a glimpse of old Fighting Joe and take a drink with him. Of course he would drink once in a while, but not every time he was asked, as he made it a rule not to get too full, knowing that whisky would get the best of a man when nothing else could.

When Captain Lyon returned to his quarters he extended Joe an invitation to visit him at his quarters, and Shelby accepted, promising to meet him the next day.

Accordingly the next day he started out to visit the barracks. Captain Lyon received him with distinguished consideration, and had a bottle of old brandy provided especially for the visit.

"You had a lively time yesterday," Lyon remarked.

"Yes, captain, we had a real sociable time. The boys behaved beautifully. I wish Parson Slugger had been there to give us his blessing."

An orderly came in and saluted Captain Lyon.

"A lady to see you, captain," he said.

"A lady to see me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, who can it be? Excuse me a few minutes, Mr. Shelby."

"Yes, sir," said Joe, as the officer arose and followed the orderly out to the commandant's office.

Captain Lyon was surprised to find waiting for him a handsome middle-aged woman, well dressed, and ladylike in her carriage, who threw back a thick veil, revealing a face of remarkable beauty.

"You are Captain Lyon?" she asked.

"Yes, madam," he replied, with a bow.

"Is there a man here by the name of Shelby? They told me he was here."

"Yes, madam, he is here."

"Can I see him?" she asked, with a great deal of concern manifested in her face and eyes.

"I will ask him, madam, as that is a question for him to decide."

"Thanks, sir."

"What name shall I give?" the captain asked.

"Never mind that. We have never seen each other, nor has he ever heard of me, nor have I ever heard of him until within the last twenty-four hours."

Captain Lyon bowed and returned to the room where Shelby was waiting for him.

"Shelby," he said, "the lady wants to see you—came here for that purpose."

He looked perfectly blank with astonishment.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"Don't know—didn't give any name—said you didn't know her."

Shelby looked still more surprised.

"I told her I would ask you if she could see you."

"Of course I will. I ain't a lady's man, but I respect a lady always. I'll go with you," and he rose to his feet and followed Captain Lyon into the office where the lady sat waiting.

"Madam," said Captain Lyon, "this is Mr. Shelby."

She rose to her feet, and stared hard at the old frontiersman.

"Mr. Shelby," she said, in a faltering voice, "I have come to you as the only man who can save me and my child from beggary, and perhaps starvation."

"Why, bless my soul, mum," said Joe, "I—I—don't know if I can, but you can bet your sweetest smile that I will if I can. What is it, anyhow?"

Joe was completely captivated by the woman's sweet face and soft, winning voice.

"I believed you would from what I heard about you this morning," said she. "I wanted to find a brave man who would not betray me, and get him to go on a dangerous errand for me, and you are the man. I will pay you well for——"

"Hold on thar, mum, please," said Joe. "Don't say a word about pay. I'm your man, without pay. What's the game? Where's the claim?"

She looked uneasily around the room, and then up at Captain Lyon.

"Come into the next room, madam," said the gallant captain, "if you wish to be more private in your communication."

"Thanks, sir. It is of the very greatest importance to me that secrecy be preserved."

They all three entered the room.

"Don't leave, captain," she said. "I know you to be an honorable man, and want you to know what the affair is. I am Mrs. Nicholson, widow of Seth Nicholson, who died in San Francisco two years ago."

"I have heard of him, madam," said Captain Lyon.

"Yes—everybody has heard of him. He owned mines and ranches all over the country, which now belong to my daughter and myself. I have had an agent out here looking after certain mines, and have found out, after putting certain papers in his hands, that he is dishonest and scheming to get all of the property in his hands. I came here to see and compel him to disgorge, but he and some other bad men have gone away where I can't see them, nor where the law can't reach them. I want you to get those papers for me, Mr. Shelby, and if you do Sarah Nicholson will be the most devoted friend to you that ever mortal man had in this life."

"I'll do it, mum!" exclaimed Joe. "Who is the galoot as is tryin' ter swindle the widder an' orphan?"

"His name is Beckwith—John Beckwith, and he has gone out near the Indian settlements on the Jasco river. He is a dangerous man, and as smart as any lawyer."

"That won't save him, mum. Ef he don't give up them papers he'll pass in his checks, an' I'll take possession of his estate."

"Oh, you must not do any murder, Mr. Shelby."

"Of course not. I never murdered any one in my life. I allers kill when its necessary to save number one—that's me, you know."

She smiled, and Joe said:

"Go home an' wait till yer hear from me."

"I'm stopping at the American Hotel here," she said, "and will stay there till you get me the papers."

"Yes, mum, stay thar, an' I will go to work to onct."

"Mr. Shelby," she said, grasping his hand, "our whole dependence is on you."

"Yes, mum, an' if I don't fetch them papers to yer, yer may know I hasn't got 'em. Old Joe Shelby allurs gits his man when he goes for 'im. Good-bye, mum."

Joe grasped her small hand in his great horny palm, and held it a moment or two.

"Your great, strong hand makes me feel strong and hopeful, Mr. Shelby," she exclaimed. "What a great strong man you are!"

"I'm strong when I'm fightin' for a lady, mum," he replied.

"Thanks, sir. You are so kind," and she arose to go. Captain Lyon escorted her back to her hotel, telling Shelby to wait till he returned.

He found Joe ready to start when he came back, and offered to let him have a horse to use in the chase of Beckwith.

"Don't want him," said Joe, shaking his head.

"Going afoot?"

"Of course. A horse can't take care of himself, while a man can. I'll go further in one day than a horse can in a day and a half."

"When are you going?"

"Right away."

"The deuce!"

"Yes. Can't hang 'round hyer an' that lady in suspense. Oh, I'm goin' for that galoot."

He left the barracks and started on the main road that led to the Indian settlements on the Jasco river, a small stream not down on the maps of the country.

He traveled with his long strides that rolled off the miles in his rear with the regularity of machinery. He knew every inch of the Indian settlements on the Jasco, and knew he could find Beckwith if he was anywhere in that part of the country.

On the way he met a party of cow-boys, who made up their minds to have some fun with him. They were well mounted and dressed in their usual picturesque costumes, and were as full of the old Nick as an egg is of meat.

"Hold up, old man," said one of them, "and show us what you can do in the way of a dance."

"I can't dance, sonny," said Joe, good-naturedly.

"Yes, you can. Give us a break-down, or I'll make you dance with a lump of hot lead in you," and he dismounted with his revolver in his hand. "Now dance."

There were five in the party, and they all laughed heartily at the situation.

Joe commenced dancing, but in just one minute he had danced up near enough to reach out and catch that youngster under the ear with his bunch of fives. He dropped like a log. But in a flash he was seized by Shelby and held up before him as a shield, whilst with the cow-boy's revolver in his right hand, he commenced firing on the other four.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

All four were hit, for Shelby never missed his game in a scrimmage like that.

With yells of rage three of the cow-boys put spurs to their horses and dashed away out of range. The fourth one fell to the ground as dead as a herring.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD JOE AND THE COWBOYS.

In a minute or two, the cowboy he held as a shield, recovered from the blow he had received, and commenced struggling to release himself.

"Oh, yer want ter git loose, do yer!" said Joe, who had disarmed him.

"Yes, let me go, yer contankerous galoot!"

Joe released him, and the two stood face to face.

"Yer a nice kind of a chap, ain't yer?" remarked Joe.

"Gimme my weepin'," said the young rascal, "an' I'll show yer how nice I am."

"Show us how nice yer kin dance," said Joe, cocking and leveling a revolver at his head.

The cowboy winced.

Joe had the drop on him.

He commenced dancing.

"Yer can do better'n that," said Joe. "Do yer best, or I'll make yer taste lead—yer own lead, too!"

He did do his best, but Joe pretended not to believe it, and so quickly raised the revolver and fired. The bullet cut off the top of his ear.

"Augh! Don't shoot, stranger!" he roared.

"Dance yer best."

"This is my best, sir. Oh, the devil!"

"It's kind rough in me, now, ain't it?" Joe asked, laughing.

"Yes, stranger."

"But then, yer see, it wasn't rough in you. Circumstances alter cases sometimes, eh!"

"I was only havin' a little fun."

"Jes so. That's all I'm havin', too. But you don't seem to enjoy it much. What's the matter with you, anyway? Be lively, or off goes t'other ear!"

The rascal did his liveliest, but it didn't save his ear, for Joe watched his opportunity and clipped it off as nicely as a razor in the hands of a barber could have done.

"Be lively now, I say, or off goes your nose. I'm just the man to have fun with cowboys. I'm old Fighting Joe, and this is the first bit of amusement I've had in a whole day."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the cowboy, the blood streaming down his shoulders, from his amputated ears. "Don't shoot again, stranger, I'll never do it again!"

"Oh, I know yer. Yon're very sorry now, but if yer hadn't made a mistake you would have had me doin' this dancin'. Jump up lively, now, or you'll lose that nose. Jump around!"

"Ugh! oh, Lord!" groaned the man.

"Stand on yer head and rest yerself," ordered Joe, and the half-dead cowboy made an honest effort to stand on his head. He fell over several times, but cried and begged for quarter like a cur.

The three wounded cowboys kept out of range, and looked on the circus, wondering what kind of a customer they had picked up this time. Two of them were pretty badly hurt, and the third one had a flesh wound that would make him unfit for duty for a number of days.

"Now let's see how well you can run. Run to your pards an' tell 'em what a derved fool you are," said Joe.

The cowboy waited for no second order of his going, but went with all the speed he could put into his heels.

Joe then threw the revolver away, and resumed his journey, satisfied with the circus he had enjoyed with the cowboys, who would have leisure time to swear over their misfortune in picking up the wrong customer.

Shelby was not the man to stop on a journey like this, unless there was a good reason for doing so. He intended traveling all night, but night overtook him just as he came in sight of an Indian camp. He knew there was no open hostilities between the whites and redskins, and so did not hesitate to go boldly up to the camp-fire and greet the Indians in a friendly manner. They were somewhat surprised at his free and off-hand manner, particularly when he was all alone, too, and greeted him accordingly.

"Where pale-face going?" one of the red-skins asked of him.

"I'm going to Jasco river to see Beckwith," he replied, to see if the Indians knew anything of Beckwith and his gang.

"Beckwith heap big chief," said one of the redskins. "Got heap of money an' whisky. Give Injun some."

"Yes, Beckwith is a good fellow, and thinks much of his red friends, I am Beckwith's friend and the friend of the redman."

"Redman don't know," said an ugly-looking fellow, shaking his head. "Bad white mans fool Injun all the time; Beckwith give him money an' whisky. Him great money chief."

"Ah, yes—he's got a heap of money. I am going to him to see about some money. He owes me money, and will pay me when he sees me."

"Where horse?" another asked.

"I never ride horse," he replied, "I ride on my feet. They can take me faster than any horse can."

"Ugh!" grunted the red rascal.

Joe pretended not to notice the insulting manner of the red-skin, and proceeded to fill and light his pipe.

He could see that they thought him a poor tramp because he had no horse or weapon about him which they could see. But he cared little for that. He had found out that they knew Beckwith, and that he had bought their good will by the liberal use of money and whisky. That was all he wanted to know, and so prepared to resume his journey.

"Ugh—pale face lose scalp if he travels by night," said one of the redskins.

"Who'll get my scalp? There are no redmen on the war path? White men don't take scalps."

"Pale-face heap big fool," said the savage. "Injun take his scalp for him, 'cause no other pale-face along."

"Injun heap big liar," said Joe, very coolly. "No Jasco Injun can take my scalp."

"Heap big talk—pale-face fool all over."

"Does the blowing Jasco want to try it? I can make him eat dirt."

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian, springing up, knife in hand. "Me cut off ears."

"Oh, you will, eh!" and Joe dealt him a blow between the eyes with his fist that sent the unlucky redskin over in the dust some twenty feet away.

He got up and glared around him as if uncertain where he was.

"Heap big Injun, ain't you?" said Joe, in a sneering tone, "but my ears! You've got a knife in your hands. You are a coward if you don't cut my ears, for I have no knife in my hands. Your people will laugh at you, and call you papoose, if you don't cut my ears. I'll make you eat dirt if you don't."

The other Indians at once demanded that he cut off the ears of the paleface, and he made at Joe again. Again Joe knocked him heels over head and made his head swim. The redskin came up again in a furious rage and made another desperate attack on him. Joe seized him by the wrist, wrenched the knife from his hand, and then wrung his nose till the red blood came in a stream. Then he held him, slapped his face, and then took up a handful of dirt and forced it into his mouth. He sputtered and tried to get away. He leapt and flew around like a ball tied to a string.

"Jump lively now!" cried Joe, giving him a kick that lifted him about three feet from the ground and let him go.

The disgraced savage had had fully enough to satisfy all his desires in that direction. He could see that he was nothing but a child in his hands, and wanted nothing more to do with him.

But the other Indians were mad at the disgrace inflicted on one of their tribe. They hooted at the discomfited wretch and called him a squaw.

Joe turned away and started off toward the Jasco.

He knew a party of the redskins would follow and try to wipe him out. But he knew how to deal with them, and had no fears as to the result.

When but a mile away he proceeded to conceal himself and wait for the coming of the redskins. They soon came along, and Joe pitched into them. They were taken completely by surprise, and made no resistance until two of the five had been cut down by the intrepid Joe.

"Whoop!" he yelled. "Go in, yer redskins! Take my har!"

A third went down under his terrific bowie, and then the other two took to their heels.

"That's the way they do, the cowardly skunks," said Joe, resuming his journey.

The Indians did not attempt to follow him any farther that night. They had been worsted by him, and didn't care to bother with him again.

About noon the next day Joe reached a Jasco village and obtained a dinner from an old Indian. He learned from the old redskin that Beckwith and several men were living in a cabin a mile above the village.

Joe resolved to go up there under pretense of seeking employment and shelter. By that means he hoped to get a good look at Beckwith and, if possible, get him in conversation with him.

"I want to see how the land lies," he said, "before striking. He may not have the papers with him, or if he has, I may have to get away with three or four of them. I'll kill a house full of sich skunks for swindling a widder an' her darter. Ef she's as good as she's purty, I'd fight all creation for her."

He wended his way up the river, and in due time came in sight of the double log-cabin, where he saw a white man sitting on the door-step whittling a stick with an ugly-looking knife.

"Hello! stranger!" he greeted, as he came up near the cabin.

"Hello, yourself," responded the man.

"Is Mr. Beckwith hyer?" Joe asked.

The man eyed him suspiciously for a moment, and then Beckwith himself came to the door and looked at him.

"What do you know about Beckwith?" Beckwith himself asked.

"Nothin," was the reply. "The redskins down in the village had but little grub, and told me that Beckwith, in the cabin up the river, had plenty. That's all I know about him, but hope he is good enough to give me a show at something to put into an empty stomach."

Beckwith laughed, and said:

"Oh, that's all right. Come in and make yourself at home," and old Joe went in.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TERRIBLE FIGHT—SHELBY'S FINE WORK.

THE invitation of Beckwith was accepted, and Joe Shelby entered the cabin and seated himself near the rear door.

"Which way have you come?" Beckwith asked.

"From down the river," was the reply of the old man.

"Did you come on foot?"

"Part of the way I did."

"What became of your horse?"

"Cowboys shot him."

"Oh, they did, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"They are as bad as the Indians, I think," remarked the other man.

"Worse than Injuns?" returned Joe, with emphasis.

"Did you have trouble with 'em?"

"Yes—lots o' trouble."

"Have a fight?"

"Yes."

"Anybody hurt?"

"I guess some of 'em did."

The man looked up at Beckwith in a manner that plainly said:

"He's blowing now."

"Did you kill any one?" Beckwith asked.

"Guess I did," was the quiet reply of the quiet old man, as he shifted a quid of tobacco from the right to the left side of his mouth.

"You didn't get killed yourself, eh?" the whittler asked.

"Not quite, but they nearly skeered me ter death."

Beckwith laughed heartily, and said:

"I'll gamble that you told the truth that time, stranger."

"You'll win if any fool coppers your bet," quietly remarked Joe.

"Which way are you going from here?" Beckwith finally asked.

"To Santa Fe. I want to go to 'Frisco, if I can git thar."

"San Francisco is a long ways off from Santa Fe," said Beckwith.

"Yes, sir; but I'd go to sunset if I'd take a notion. Ever bin thar, stranger?"

"Where? Sunset?"

"Well, no, I meant 'Frisco."

"Oh, yes. It's a lively town."

"So I've heard, an' I want to go thar."

"When do you start again?"

Joe looked at the questioner, and knew from the question that they preferred his room to his company. But he quietly replied:

"As soon as I rest a little and get something to eat."

"You can have all you want to eat," said Beckwith.

"And I can pay for all I can eat," was the reply.

"We don't want any pay, sir," said Beckwith, rather stiffly. "We don't keep a hotel."

"Of course yer don't. Hope yer didn't take me for a fool."

"Oh, no—of course not."

Just then a party of seven cowboys rode up before the door of the cabin, whooping and yelling like so many Comanches.

"Cowboys!" gasped the old whittler, jumping up and shutting the door.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Beckwith, turning pale. "What are they after now, I wonder?"

"Bring out the galoot!" cried the leader of the cowboys, sending a pistol ball into the timber of the door. "Bring him out, or we'll burn you out!"

"What do they mean?" Beckwith asked.

"They mean that they want *me*," said Joe. "But you won't turn me out—one agin *seven*, would you?"

"Didn't you hear 'em say they'd burn us out if we didn't bring you out?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you s'pose I'm going to be roasted just to give you a shelter?"

"But they will kill me," said Joe.

"That's your lookout. You must take your chances."

"Send 'im out, I say!" yelled the leader of the cowboys, "or we'll burn yer out!"

"Hold on, there!" said Beckwith. "We'll open the door, and you can take him out. We don't know anything about him. He came here an hour ago, and asked to rest and have something to eat."

Beckwith opened the door.

Two of the cow-boys dismounted and rushed to the door, to be the first in.

But they both fell across the threshold dead men, for Joe, with a revolver in each hand, had given each a bullet in his brain. Then, ere the sound of the shots ceased echoing, he dashed to the door, and delivered two more shots, one of which killed a third, and a fourth was wounded. Then he sprang back out of range just in time to escape the bullets the three unharmed cow-boys poured into the open doorway of the cabin. The next moment he found a crack between the logs, and fired through it, killing his man instantly.

It was all done so quickly that Beckwith and his companion did not realize that only two men of the cow-boys remained unhurt out of the seven, and that they were making all haste to get away from such a hot place. The wounded man had gone away as soon as he got his hurt.

"Thar!" cried Joe, with disgust, "that's the way they do. Just as it gits lively an' interestin' they run away and spoil the fun."

"Fun!" exclaimed Beckwith. "Why, there's four men dead!"

"Wal, *you* ain't hurt, are yer?"

"No, but——"

"Then the fun is all on our side, ain't it?"

"Who in blue blazes are you?" demanded Beckwith, amazed at the terrific work of the stranger.

"My name is Joe Shelby," was the reply, "an' I'm the most peaceable man in the world."

"You are the worst fighter I ever heard of!" exclaimed Beckwith. "You got away with seven at one time."

"And you wanted to give me up to 'em, to hang and shoot! Yer are a brave man, indeed. Hanged if I don't believe you'd go back on a lone widder."

Beckwith winced, but the other man said:

"Don't give us any lip."

"Take that for your lip!" said Joe, giving him a back-handed blow on the mouth with his left hand.

The man drew his revolver, but Joe got the drop on him and sent a ball through his head; he fell near the door by the two cowboys.

Beckwith was amazed.

He had never heard of such slaughter by one man.

"Hold up your hands," said Joe, leveling his revolver at his head.

"For God's sake, don't shoot!" cried Beckwith, holding his hands above his head.

"That depends," said Joe. "I came here to kill you if you didn't act and converse to suit me. Your name is Beckwith, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"You are the agent of Sarah Nicholson's estate?"

"Yes."

"You've got the bulge on her and are tryin' ter git all her property?" Beckwith hesitated and trembled like a leaf.

"Speak out. I ain't the man ter fool with!"

"Yes," gasped the wretch.

"You've got them papers?"

"Yes."

"Whar?"

"Here, on my person."

"I'm goin' ter sarch yer. Ef yer winks or moves ye're a dead man."

Joe searched him and found a large wallet in the breast-pocket of his coat.

"Are they in this?"

"Yes."

Joe then disarmed him.

"Now open that 'ere wallet and take out them papers," he said, "an' tell me all about 'em."

He dared not disobey.

He took out each paper and read them carefully over to Joe, who listened in silence, taking it all in as well as one of his limited education could.

"Is them all?" he asked.

"Yes—every one," was the reply.

"Tie 'em up in a bundle."

He did so.

"If I find one missin'," said Joe, "I'll kill yer as quick as I would a coyote."

"They are all here."

"Very well," and Joe took up the package and put it in his pocket. "Now I'm goin' back to Santa Fe. Mrs. Nicholson is thar. Ef yer want ter see her an' ax her pardin, yer can go 'long with me."

"I—I—don't want to go," he said.

"No, I s'pose not," returned Joe. "I wouldn't ef I was you. I'd go 'way up the country an' turn Navajo. Yer ain't fit ter have a white skin on yer. Why in ther tarnal blazes didn't you do right, marry the widder and boss the whole ranche?"

Beckwith made no reply. He was ashen-hued—the sickest-looking man in all New Mexico.

"Yer didn't work ther claim right, pard," said Joe. "Ther mother or darter would have cottoned ter yer ef yer had worked right, for yer ain't a hard-lookin' cuss."

"What are you going to do with those papers?" Beckwith asked.

"Give 'em to the widder," replied Joe. "She come to me in Santa Fe, an' said as how she'd been told I war just the man she wanted, an' up an' told me all about yer little game. I knowed how it was, an' put out ter hunt yer up. I ain't slow when I git started. Yes, I'm one o' Parson Slugger's boys, an' he allus told us ter do *well* whatever we had ter do. Yer see how I did it with them 'ere cow-boys. Lord bless yer, pard, that wasn't nothin'. I'm a peaceable man, but I ain't no Quaker when the war breaks out. I wish Parson Slugger had been hyer when them cow-boys come up! He'd given me his blessin' an' told me ter go in an' do my best."

Beckwith gazed at the man with the most profound astonishment. Such talking under such circumstances was a puzzle to him.

"Yer ain't sociable much," Joe remarked.

"I don't feel sociable at all," said Beckwith. "I am ruined—a fugitive from justice."

"Whar will yer go?"

"Anywhere—out of the world, I guess."

"Go drown yerself—don't waste no good powder in goin' out of the world. Better jine ther Injuns; you'd make a good Injun."

Beckwith hung his head. He couldn't look the man in the face, and Joe continued:

"I'm goin' back to Santa Fe. You may go whar you please. If you have any money belongin' to the widder, hand it over."

He gave Joe several hundred dollars in gold, and then said:

"That's all—everything."

"You may rob them dead uns out thar," said Joe, rising and leaving the table.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONCLUSION.

SHELBY lost no time in getting away from the cabin where such bloody work had been done. He felt of the package to make sure the papers were there, and then turned and left the cabin, leaving Beckwith there alone with the five dead men, to amuse himself in any way he might choose.

He went right down the river till he reached the Indian village where he had first learned the locality of the Beckwith cabin.

But no sooner was he out of sight than Beckwith sprang to his feet and swore like a pirate. He tore his hair, stamped on the floor, and exclaimed:

"Ten thousand maledictions on his head! He has cleaned me out of a round million! I am penniless now! I dare not show my face anywhere in New Mexico or California after this, for all will be known! Why didn't I draw and blow his brains out? He would have been too quick for me. Heavens, what a quick shooter he is! But I am ruined!

He is making off with a million dollars' worth of property! I may as well die as lose that. Hanged if I don't go down to the Indian village and get the whole population on him. Those Indians will do anything for money. I'll offer to make every Indian rich if they will kill him and bring me his scalp and the papers."

He ran out of the cabin and rushed down toward the Indian village. Joe Shelby was about a mile ahead of him.

When he reached the savages, whose friendship he had gained by the liberal use of money, he cried out:

"Where are your warriors? Your enemy and mine has been here, and will lead the white cowboys to destroy your village. Do you warriors hear me? I am the great money chief! Let the braves listen to my words. Whosoever shall bring me the scalp of the man who passed through here on foot just now, him will I make richer than ever redskin was."

There were about twenty young bucks in the village. They had just crossed the river and come in from a hunt.

They sprang up with a yell and a whoop, and started off at once in hot pursuit of Joe Shelby. Of course, they had no doubts about getting his scalp. The only question among them was *who* should get it, and that made them eager, impulsive, and full of wild enthusiasm.

On they rushed, whooping and yelling like a mob.

Most of them were on horseback.

Joe heard and saw them coming.

He knew at a glance that Beckwith had raised the village on him, and that he would have to fight for his scalp.

Just over on his right was a small patch of dense timber—a sort of island on the prairie that surrounded it. He saw that his safety lay in reaching that piece of timber before they could catch up with him, as they were too many for him.

Away he ran and the redskins in hot pursuit. They yelled and fired a few shots at him, but he never faltered.

"Now let 'em come on," he said, as he gained the woods.

They did come on.

But they were so many and he but one, they never dreamed he would attempt anything but to conceal himself. The moment, therefore, that they reached the timber they commenced an active search for him.

Two ran across him in a clump of bushes, but his bowie did such quick work that they didn't get a chance to give the alarm.

They went down in the silence of death, and the terrible fighter moved to another clump of bushes to be out of the way when the dead bodies should be discovered.

He was not more than a couple of minutes in the second thicket when another redskin ran foul of him. He disemboweled him with one terrific sweep of his bowie, and the doomed redskin sent up a howl as he went down.

Then every savage in the woods knew that he had been found.

They rushed upon him in the thicket. But in the general confusion they could not see or recognize him. But he did some terrible work with his death-dealing bowie, and in almost as many seconds five more were put in a fair way to visit the happy hunting-grounds of their people before the stars shone again.

Quick as a flash of lightning he darted out from the writhing mass of redskins, and dashed into another thicket without being seen by any one of the combatants, and quietly waited for them to run across him again.

In a few minutes the redskins stopped fighting, and looked over the dead in search of the man whose scalp was to make the fortune of some one of their number. But they were doomed to a terrible disappointment. Instead of the mangled body of the lone white man they were in search of they found six of their own warriors either dead or dying.

Howls of rage filled the woods.

They swore in choice Jasco lingo to burn him alive at the stake, and resumed the search again, this time bent on wreaking a terrible vengeance on the man who objected to being wiped out by them.

Suddenly two more of them ran against him in another thicket, and gave the alarm.

Crack!

Crack! went his revolver, and the two redskins started for the happy hunting-grounds together.

Joe Shelby never missed anything he shot at.

Dodging to another thicket, he waited for another couple to stumble against him.

This second or third slaughter alarmed the redskins. They saw his tactics, and resolved to go in a body after that and thus foil him.

Joe saw that they were too many for him to tackle in a body, and began to scratch his head to devise some way of escape.

The woods was full of dry grass as high as the knee, and he resolved on the desperate measure of firing it in order to attract their attention to the fire, and thus enable him to escape unperceived.

No sooner had he made up his mind to fire the woods than he proceeded to put it into execution. He looked around and saw that the sun was going down, and that the savages were moving round to his left.

Taking a match he struck it and dropped it in the dry grass, and then darted away toward another part of the wood, where he dropped another match. Then away to a third spot, where the third one ignited as soon as it was dropped.

The first match blazed up into a big flame in an instant, and the redskins, seeing the smoke, dashed toward it for the purpose of putting it out or of catching their game.

But they might as well have attempted to stop a flash of lightning from a storm-cloud as to stop the progress of that blaze. It leapt up above their heads and roared around them as though it wanted to cook them and give them a taste of their future home.

"Ugh! heap big fire!" groaned one of the redskins. "Prairie burn an' village burn, too."

The second match was up in a blaze in another minute and threatened to destroy the woods in a few minutes. The Indians ran toward it, howling and excited, only to find it bursting up in a third place.

Then, as if a big blaze created it, the wind arose and the red tongues of flame reached out and lapped up everything within reach.

The Indians yells betrayed their fears. Those who had horses ran to them to save them and themselves from the devouring element.

One of the horsemen dashed by Joe, but a crack from his revolver emptied the saddle, and Joe sprang into it, just as the wild blaze reached him.

One of the redskins was caught by the flames and almost instantly consumed. He was strangled and fell to rise no more.

Away dashed the entire party, Joe right in the midst of them. But the dense volume of smoke so enveloped them that one could not recognize the other. Men and horses were frightened alike.

"Ugh!" grunted the big savage that Joe rode against. Keep way. Big fire catch Injun. Pale-face burn up. Nobody git scalp."

Joe said nothing, but urged his horse, which happened to be a good one, to his utmost speed, turning him round to the left and leaving the Indians to the right.

"Hanged if that fire didn't save me," muttered Joe, as he looked round at the conflagration he had called into existence. "It will do a deal of mischief and burn up that Indian village, but I don't care for that. I'm lucky in getting this horse, for, while I can make a hundred miles quicker than he can, he can make twenty miles faster than I. I've got away from them, and that's all I want. Steady, now, old fellow."

Away he dashed over the prairie, the clear stars coming out and gazing down at the red wall of bright flames that was sweeping over the plain.

In a half hour not an Indian could be seen. They had circled round to the right and made for the Jasco Rivor, to move their women and children to the other side before the flames could reach it.

Out of the roadway of the flames Joe rode more leisurely, and spent the night in the saddle. All night long he could see the glare of the prairie fire, and knew that the work of destruction was still going on.

"It wur the hottest place I wur ever in," he muttered to himself. "An' ef I hadn't taken this 'ere horse I'd a been roasted. That 'ere skunk of a Beckwith set 'em on me, an' I hope he'll get caught in that 'ere blaze."

Morning found him well on the way to Sante Fe, which place he reached before sunset that day. He gave the horse to Captain Lyon, telling him how he had gotten possession of it.

"Did you find your man, Shelby?" the gallant captain asked.

Joe looked hard at him and asked:

"Would I have come back ef I hadn't, captain?"

"No, I don't think you would," and the captain grasped his hand. "I congratulate you on your good fortune. You have done what no other man could have done."

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Joe. "Old Parson Slugger could have gone in and worked the claim 'thout any trouble at all. You ought ter

see him go in on ther free grace principle. He just lays out everything and then prays for ther sinners."

Captain Lyon laughed heartily and then asked:

"What became of your man?"

"Hang me ef I know. I didn't have ther heart to kill him, he gave up so quiet like. He may have got roasted in that 'ere prairie fire. Hope he did, for robbing a widder an' her darter."

"Mrs. Nicholson is at the — hotel. She doesn't look for you in a week or ten days. She sent for me yesterday and asked me if I really thought you could catch Beckwith. I said if any man *could* do it you were the one that would."

"Thankee," said Joe, turning away. He wanted to report to the widow at once.

He found her at the hotel.

His return was quite a surprise to her.

"Why, Mr. Shelby!" she exclaimed, on seeing him. "I didn't expect you so soon. It's bad news that has sent you here. You have not been able to find him!"

"Is them the papers yer wanted, mum?" Joe asked, throwing the bundle of papers he had taken from Beckwith down on the table before her.

She hurriedly opened the package and glanced over the pages.

Her eyes recognized them at once.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "They are all here! You have saved my fortune, Mr. Shelby!" and she seized his hand, kissed it, and burst into tears of joy. "Oh, how can I ever repay you?"

"I don't ask no pay, an' don't want none, mum," said he, hastily brushing away a tear with his disengaged hand.

"What did you do with him, Mr. Shelby?" she asked, as soon as she could compose herself sufficiently to converse. "I hope you didn't kill him."

"No, mum. I spared him for your sake."

"Oh, you did! I'm so glad! It would have been a source of sadness all my life if you had killed him. Dear me, what a good man you are! They tell me you've killed many men in your day, Mr. Shelby."

"I've had ter wipe out a few, mum," he said, "ter keep 'em from wipin' me out."

"Oh, then, you did right, of course, but it must be awful to kill a man."

"So it is, mum, to ther chap as gits killed."

"But it must make the other man feel badly."

"No, mum. The other man feels good—glad he didn't have to pass in his checks."

Mrs. Nicholson laughed in spite of the sanguinary nature of the topic.

"Where do you live, Mr. Shelby?"

"Everywhere, mum. I go wherever I please, and do work that pays best."

"I must have some good, brave man to attend to my business—look after my ranches, mines, and other property. Won't you do it for me? I will pay you well if——"

"I—I—don't—know, mum," he faltered. "I—ain't got much book-larnin', and——"

"You've got good hard sense, Mr. Shelby," said she, quickly interrupting him, "and a brave, true heart which any one can trust. Say you will, please, and lift a great load off my heart. You don't know how much better I will feel when I know that I have a man in charge whom I can trust."

"I—I'll do my best, mum," he said; "but I've led such a rovin' life that I don't know that I can pin myself down to one thing or one place all the time."

"Oh, you will have several ranches in charge, some as far as one hundred miles apart. So you see you would have a good deal of roving to do."

She then agreed to give him a big salary for the rest of his natural life, if he would look after her property.

Thus the old fighter found a pleasant berth in his latter days. But he was Fighting Joe still, and had several brushes with cow-boys, Indians and gamblers. He came out first in every encounter. A year later the widow came to the conclusion that he would make a good husband, and frankly told him she would elect him to that position if he would serve—and he *served*. Who wouldn't?

[THE END.]

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